

# Cross-Country Scoring Made Simple

## There Are Solutions to Traditional Scoring Confusions

by Ken Ryesky

**H**igh school and college cross-country meets are scored as follows: For each team, the first seven runners figure into the scoring and any additional runners are disregarded for scoring purposes. The first runner to cross the finish line scores one point, the second runner scores two, third gets three points and so on. The placings of the first five runners on each team are added and the team with the *low* score is the winner.

Runners who finish sixth and seventh on a team can displace their opponents; that is, the opposing team's fifth runner can be relegated from 10th finisher in the race to 12th. Such a thing would add two points to the opponents' score.

Consider this hypothetical meet between Team X and Team Y:

Place	Runner	Team	Time
1.	Xavier	XX	15:20
2.	Xander	XX	15:23
3.	Xanthopoulos	XX	15:30
4.	Yarnell	Y	15:31
5.	Yelverton	Y	15:34
6.	Yaffe	Y	15:35
7.	Yanelli	Y	15:38
8.	Yeakel	Y	15:43
9.	Yudelson	Y	15:57
10.	Yolland	Y	16:49
11.	Ximines	XX	17:42
12.	Xenakos	XX	19:02
13.	Xenophon	XX	19:35
14.	Xerxes	XX	19:51

The score: Team XX 29, Team Y 30.

Team XX, with the low score of 29, wins the meet.

Yale Young, coach of Team Y, returned to the locker room and muttered, "Dumb luck! The XX's ran terribly as a team! We'd have won that one if Yarnell had been two seconds faster!"

Coach Young is right. Team XX *did* run terribly. Their fourth runner, Ximines, who finished 11th in the race, was almost two minutes behind Yeakel, Team Y's fifth finisher. Xenakos, Team XX's final placer, crossed the finish line well over three minutes behind Yeakel.

Team Y, on the other hand, really didn't do so bad except in the scoring. The first six Team Y runners had a good pack and all six crossed the line within a 30-second period.

A great amount of the post-meet pressure here is on Yarnell. Had he cut his time by two seconds he would have

finished third, making Xanthopoulos the fourth place finisher. The score would have been 29-30 in Team Y's favor, had Yarnell crossed the finish line ahead of Xanthopoulos.

The fact that Yarnell was but a second behind Xanthopoulos does not matter. Had Yarnell crossed the line an hour after Xanthopoulos, he still would have been one place after the Team XX runner. The fact that the members of Team Y had a closely-knit pack is of no consequence in the order-of-finish scoring system, nor is the fact that Team XX was all strung out across the race course except for Xavier, Xander and Xanthopoulos.

The element of time plays no part in scoring cross-country meets when the order-of-finish scoring system is used. Furthermore, time standards from one course are meaningless on any other, due to the fact that each cross-country course varies in running surface, length and terrain.

There is a simple way of scoring cross-country which accounts for time of finish—simply adding the times of the first five runners on each team, the low score again being the winner. Determined in such a manner, the score for the Team XX versus Team Y meet would be: Team Y 78:01, Team XX 82:57.

Team Y, with the low composite time, wins the meet.

The result is, perhaps, a fairer representation of the teams' performances because it accounts for the fact that Team Y had a close pack and that except for its first three runners, Team XX's performance was disorganized and mediocre.

A triangular meet is when one race is held with three teams. Three contests are figured in the scoring, that is, each possible pair from among the three teams. When any two teams are compared, the runners from the third team are totally disregarded.

With order-of-finish scoring, it is possible to have a situation in a triangular meet where Team A defeats Team B, Team B defeats Team C, and Team C defeats Team A. In other words, A did better than B, who did better than C, who, in turn, did better than A—all in the same race. Absurd as it seems, such

is possible when order-of-finish scoring is used in triangular meets.

It actually happened last October when three Montgomery County, Pennsylvania high school teams—Upper Merion, Springfield and Cheltenham—had a triangular meet. The results:

Place	Runner	Team	Time
1.	Mike Berry	C	15:47
2.	Jim Griffin	S	15:59
3.	John Randall	S	16:09
4.	Rich Power	UM	16:15
5.	Mike Cahill	UM	16:18
6.	Bob High	S	16:37
7.	Scott Vogt	UM	16:41
8.	Walter Scott	C	16:47
9.	Steve Wildeman	UM	16:51
10.	T. Hutchinson	C	16:54
11.	Mike Parisi	C	16:55
12.	A. Faigenbaum	C	17:04
13.	Rob Jordan	S	17:13
14.	Andy Godley	S	17:18
15.	Mike Bennett	S	17:31
16.	Dan Pfeiffer	UM	17:44

Upper Merion 25	Cheltenham 30
Springfield 25	Upper Merion 31
Cheltenham 27	Springfield 28

The above scores were official and figured by the official order-of-finish system. Though official, the results are self-contradictory. Upper Merion did better than Cheltenham, who did better than Springfield, who did better than Upper Merion.

Addition of place order as a whole (that is, *not* disregarding any team and having a simple three-way meet) yields the following score:

Springfield 38
Upper Merion 41
Cheltenham 42

This evaluation would leave many dissatisfied. Springfield's strength was in the fact that Griffin and Randall placed second and third in the race. Upper Merion defeated Cheltenham, even though their fifth man, Pfeiffer, was actually displaced by Springfield's sixth runner, Bennett.

Addition of times of the top five on each team yields:

Springfield 83:16
Cheltenham 83:27
Upper Merion 83:49

While it might not please everyone, the time-of-finish scoring method is certainly a fair way of evaluating the



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three performances of the three teams. Even by this method the score for this particular meet is close—something which, perhaps, was expected.

The time-of-finish system, both statistically and mathematically, is a fairer and better representation of team performance than is the order-of-finish system. Under the time-of-finish system, a runner who finishes 30 seconds ahead of one of the opponents scores better than he would have had the opponent been only a second behind. The team whose runners remain in a close pack does better than one whose runners have strung themselves out across the race course.

A scoring system based only upon order of finish does not take these factors into account, and thus, can have many inequities. These inequities are exemplified by the meet between Team XX and Team Y.

Another flaw in the order-of-finish scoring system is the fact that once a team has placed a 1-2-3 finish, the remaining contestants can do nothing to affect the outcome of the meet and might as well walk (or even crawl) to the finish line.

Running can be a very boring and grueling activity unless there is individual incentive to produce and to achieve. A distance runner, perhaps more than any other athlete, needs motivation—constant, prolonged motivation—in order to continue running. No matter how much *esprit de corps* and teamwork are emphasized in a sport such as cross-country, the incentive and motivation to constantly and steadily exert must never be removed.

Incentive for individual achievement is affected when a team has a 1-2-3 finish in a cross-country meet. The performance of the remaining runners will not affect the outcome of the meet—it has already been won—and much incentive to exert and to excel is gone.

Such need not be the case, if the score was determined by the addition of the contestants' times. Knowing that a few seconds shaved from his time might make the difference, runners would always have the incentive to excel. As the runners strive to make each second count, there will be an inherent tendency for better times, better races and better cross-country teams.

For the incentive reason alone, if for no other, those powers-that-be who administer cross-country as a high school or collegiate sport should consider a cross-country scoring system which accounts for time of finish. □